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AUTHOR Davis, Ken
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ABSTRACT

An instructor's effort to internationalize a business communication course taught him much about the relationships between cognitive egocentrism and cognitive ethnocentrism. Cognitive egocentrism is the chief obstacle to be overcome in learning to write, even within a culture, while cognitive ethnocentrism is the chief obstacle to be overcome in learning to communicate interculturally. Business writing students at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis exchange simulated job application letters and resumes with business communication and business English students at the Antwerp Business School in Antwerp, Belgium. Students at both institutions read the documents from their counterparts and decide which applicants to "interview" and which to reject. The Indianapolis students write personal, student-to-student critiques of the Belgian applications, and the Antwerp students present videotaped oral evaluations of the American applications. Four subjective outcomes of the internationalizing of this business communication course are: (1) students seem to find the course even more authentic than earlier, noninternational versions; (2) students seem more motivated than their earlier counterparts; (3) as students worked to overcome cognitive egocentrism, they began to overcome cognitive ethnocentrism as well; and (4) in an increasingly international and intercultural communication environment, egocentrism and ethnocentrism are the same thing. (RS)

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DRAFT (8 March, 1993)

# Internationalizing a Business Communication Course

Twelfth Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference
on Languages and Communication
for World Business and the Professions

Ken Davis

Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis

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As business communication becomes increasingly international, courses and textbooks in business communication are increasingly including advice on communicating internationally. Yet advice is rarely enough. Students need to practice what they are learning in communication situations that are as authentic as possible.

For the past three years, my business writing students at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI) have been exchanging simulated job application letters and resumes with business communication and business English students at Handelshogeschool Antwerpen (Antwerp Business School) in Antwerp, Belgium. Simultaneously, throughout the semester, my students work in teams to research and write simulated consultant's reports on business communication with another specific country or region of the world.

This effort at internationalizing a business communication course has taught me much about the relationships between what has been called "cognitive egocentrism" and what I have begun calling "cognitive ethnocentrism." I regard cognitive egocentrism as the chief obstacle to be overcome in learning to write, even *within* a culture, and cognitive ethnocentrism as the chief obstacle to be overcome in learning to communicate *inter*culturally. Specifically—and this is my thesis today—I have come to believe that overcoming cognitive egocentrism is an important step in overcoming cognitive ethnocentrism and, conversely, that working to overcome cognitive ethnocentrism can help overcome cognitive egocentrism.

I will begin by defining briefly cognitive egocentrism and cognitive ethnocentrism and their importance in teaching international business communication. I will then describe my course, especially the two internationally focused projects at its heart. Finally, I will discuss the outcomes of the course, especially as regards cognitive ego- and ethnocentrism.

Psychologists, notably Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, have observed that much of children's early use of language is egocentric, with little effort or effectiveness at communicating with a listener. Some of this egocentric language is what Vygotsky called "inner speech," a kind of thinking aloud, often in times of play, used by children to organize their activity, with no intention at all of communicating with someone else. But even when children at this stage attempt to communicate, they often lack the cognitive ability to identify with the listener and to shape the message to the

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listener's knowledge, attitudes, or needs. I recall, for example, my daughter coming home from preschool and reporting, with glee, that the teacher had "put the thing on the thing by the door, and it was so funny." "What thing, Casey?" I asked. "The thing by the door," she answered. "She put the thing on it, and it was so funny."

Children gradually grow out of this cognitive egocentrism in their speech. But as a number of researchers have pointed out, a kind of cognitive egocentrism hangs on much longer in writing. In a 1978 study, for example, Bracewell, Scardamalia, and Bereiter found that the ability to target writing to the needs of different audiences did not appear in students until upper high school grades.

In her pioneering article, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," Linda Flower argues that the cognitive egocentrism of what she calls "writer-based prose" is a characteristic of even many adult writers. While such "writer-based prose," Flower says, "may be a useful road into the creative process for some writers"(28), it is "inadequately suited to the needs of the reader" (22). Writer-based prose, claims Flower, "is the source of some of the most common and pervasive problems in academic and professional writing" (19).

I suggest, then, that to the extent that writing is seen as a communicative activity, overcoming cognitive egocentrism is the chief obstacle to writing effectively.

What I call "cognitive ethnocentrism" has the same relationship to ethnocentrism that cognitive egocentrism has to a more general egocentrism. Samovar and Porter define *ethnocentrism* as "the inclination to believe that our group is superior to all other groups and cultures" (17); they also quote Ruhly's definition of ethnocentrism as "the tendency to interpret or to judge all other groups, their environments, and their communication according to the categories and values of our own culture. (279)" Cognitive ethnocentrism, then, is the cognitive component of this tendency. For the would-be communicator, it is the lack of cognitive ability to identify with a listener or reader from another culture and to shape the message to that listener's knowledge, attitudes, or needs. I concur with Samovar and Porter that ethnocentrism "might well be the single major barrier to intercultural communication" (278).

My advanced business writing course, titled "Business and Administrative Writing," is designed to help students overcome both cognitive egocentrism and cognitive ethnocentrism. If overcoming cognitive egocentrism is a central goal of *any* writing course, it is surely so in a business writing course, focusing entirely, in Britton's terms, on transactional, as opposed to expressive or poetic, writing. Therefore, business writing courses always (as far as I know) ask students to write for real or simulated business audiences—audiences beyond the teacher and fellow students. In making such assignments, business writing courses help students learn to identify with, and account for, less and less familiar readers and so overcome the obstacle of cognitive egocentrism.

Three years ago, I decided to internationalize the course. I took advantage of a visit to Belgium, and met with several Belgian members of the Association for Business Communication to discuss possible classroom partnerships. I subsequently entered into such a partnership with two faculty members at the Antwerp Business School: Teun de Rycker, who teaches business English as a second language, and J. Piet Verckens, who teaches business Flemish to native speakers. That

partnership, which we have come to call the Antwerp-Indianapolis project, has now finished its third year.

The project begins with two simulated, but plausible, job descriptions, one describing a summer internship for an American student at the Antwerp visitors' bureau, the other describing a summer internship for a Belgian student in an international business seminar at IUPUI. Students at both institutions write resumes and application letters for the foreign internship, and these letters and resumes are exchanged across the Atlantic. Students at both institutions then read the documents from their counterparts and, acting as a simulated selection committee, decide which applicants will appear on their short list for telephone interviews. (Because of time and money constraints, these interviews do not take place.) To conclude the process, the Indianapolis students write simulated formal rejections or requests for interviews, as well as personal, student-to-student critiques of the Belgian applications. The Antwerp students present oral evaluations of the American applications; these presentations are videotaped and sent to the U.S.

During and after these exchanges, students in both countries discuss what they are learning about the foreign students' writing and about the foreign students' responses to their own writing. Some of this learning is lexical (Flemish students may not know what it means to "letter in baseball"; Hoosier students may not know what a "baccalaureate" is). Some is formal (Flemish students may regard typed application letters as impersonal and cold; Hoosier students may regard handwritten application letters as sloppy and unprofessional). Some is conceptual (Flemish students may regard American letters and resumes as ineffectively arrogant; Hoosier students may regard Flemish letters and resumes as ineffectively modest).

As my students move through the stages of the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project, they also work in teams of four or five to write a report on communicating with a specific country other than Belgium; last semester the four teams chose France, Germany, Japan, and Mexico. To increase the authenticity of this assignment, they play the role of a consulting team, writing a report that will help employees of a specific American company that is just becoming involved internationally. Because most IUPUI students are commuters, working while they pursue their degrees, most of these simulations are based on actual local companies of which at least one member of each team has personal knowledge.

The reports are based on both primary and secondary sources: interviews with people from the country in question and with Americans who have communicated extensively in or with that country, as well as library research.

Much of the report consists of the kind of "tips" (such as "In Japan, present and receive business cards with both hands") that are disdained by a number of authorities on intercultural communication as leading to stereotyping. I suggest, however, that it is only through an accumulation of such factoids about specific cultural differences that a learner can begin to break through cognitive ethnocentrism and begin to acquire the kind of nonspecific intercultural communication competence that these same authorities advocate. Moreover, even these beginning student reports almost always go past superficial behavioral advice and begin to touch deeper cultural issues.

Although I have conducted no treatment studies of the internationalized course, I can subjectively report three outcomes.

One outcome is that students seem to find the course even more authentic than earlier, noninternational versions. Most students know very well that they will soon be entering jobs—if they are not in them already—in which they will need to communicate more and more across borders and across cultures.

A second outcome is that students seem more motivated than their earlier counterparts. Part of this motivation may derive from the perception of increased authenticity. But much derives from the mystique of communicating with real people in another country, about jobs and locations which both sets of students perceive as appealing. (This was an unexpected bit of learning: the Indianapolis students were surprised to learn that their Belgian counterparts saw Indianapolis as an exotic, exciting destination, and vice versa.)

The third outcome, and the most interesting to me, involves the relationships between cognitive egocentrism and cognitive ethnocentrism. On one hand, as students worked—through authentic writing assignments with distant readers—to overcome cognitive egocentrism, they began to overcome cognitive ethnocentrism as well. More than any textbook or lecture could have done, the actual experience of communicating with people in other culture, and giving and receiving structured feedback on that communication, helped the students begin to acquire the beginnings of true intercultural communication competence.

On the other hand, students' efforts at overcoming cognitive ethnocentrism helped them overcome some of their cognitive egocentrism and so grow as writers. The "foregrounding" of sender-receiver differences, differences that became obvious when communicating across the Atlantic, helped students become more aware of the need to identify with, and shape their writing for, any reader, even readers within their own culture. This "foregrounding" effect would not have been as dramatic if the Indianapolis students had been communicating with readers in Gary, or the Antwerp students with readers in Ghent.

Finally, this interrelationship between egocentrism and ethnocentrism has made me realize that in an increasingly international and intercultural communication environment, egocentrism and ethnocentrism are the same thing. When any one of us communicates across cultures, our residual egocentrism amounts to the same thing as ethnocentrism, and vice versa.

Linda Flower, in her article "Writer-Based Prose," paraphrases the argument of David Olson that "the history of written language has been the progressive creation of an instrument which could convey complete and explicit meanings in a text. The history of writing is the transformation of language from utterance to text—from oral meaning created within a shared context of a speaker and listener to a written meaning fully represented in an autonomous text" (29-30). Perhaps what I am seeing in a small way in my classroom, and what we are all seeing in a larger way in the international business environment, is the next stage in the history of written language. In the past it was enough for writing to move beyond egocentrism, beyond local shared contexts; it was enough that texts were autonomous at the level of a single culture. Increasingly—especially when the computer and the fax machine have made writing the medium of choice for international

communication, written texts have to move beyond *ethno*centrism, beyond cultural contexts, and function autonomously at an intercultural level.